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Thirteen-year-old girls: Tales of school transition and feminine identity

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Abstract

This paper is based on an ethnographic multi-method study, involving interviews, focus groups, diaries and observation. It explores some of the tales of thirteen-year-old female students who told about their experiences of growing up and making the transition from primary to secondary school. The paper argues that their experiences of growing up and changing schools were not a simple, linear process, but involved feelings of intense pleasure and tremendous pain. Building on a growing body of literature concerned with the experience of growing-up, this paper seeks to highlight the multiple ways in which these female students negotiated this phase of change and constructed identity. The paper suggests that school context fosters a sense of maturity upon which thirteen-year-old female students can build their various identities, individually and collectively as a peer group.

Keywords: transition, identity, discourse, change, school experience

Introduction

'Transition' is a term that has traditionally been used to trace students across a change in schools and to focus on their academic achievement and the school organization and curriculum (Nisbet & Entwistle, 1969; Finger & Silverman, 1966; Youngman, 1986; Cotterell, 1982; Brown & Armstrong, 1982). More recent research, however, has been able to move beyond this singular definition of transition to speak of the multiple transitions students make as they grow up and change schools (Aapola, Gonick, & Harris, 2005; Driscoll, 2004; Harris, 2004; Walkerdine, Lucey, & Melody, 2001). Emerging in a time characterized by a growing interest in subjectivities and identity construction, these newer studies seek to explore how gender, race, and class affect students' identities as they move through the education system (Jackson & Warin, 2000; O'Brien, 2003).

Purposes

This study builds upon these newer researches of identity construction and school transition. It explores the tales about primary-school female students' experiences of growing up, changing

schools, and school transition. The paper draws on research carried out first in a single sex, selective primary school in the Sacramento County areas of North California where the researcher followed a group of twelve-year-old female students through their last year of primary school and into their first year of secondary school. This was an ethnographic multi-method project, involving interviews, focus groups, diaries and observation.

The theoretical approach that this paper takes is influenced by feminist post-structural theory (Weedon, 1997) and in particular Foucault's (1977) notion of discourse. Discourses can be understood as ways of making sense of the world and ways of working out what we regard to be true (Paechter, 2001). Discourses, therefore, shape identities and social interactions as they prescribe natural and normal ways of behaving. This paper seeks to highlight some of the discourses available to girls as they grow up and change schools. This paper also seeks to understand how certain dominant discourses constrained or limited female students in their identity constructions across the school transition period. The paper also draws on social generalizing theory (Alanen, 2001) to suggest that as the female students in this study moved schools, they were subject to dominant discourses of natural development; they were expected to become grown-ups and leave their childhood identities behind them.

The school context is central in understanding how these dominant discourses are produced and reproduced by the girls in their everyday lives. This paper proposes that middle class, single sex environment of the school intensified dominant discourses of femininity and limited the ways in which the girls felt that they could grow up and become women. Similarly, it will be argued that the selective nature of the school and its strict academic ethos intensified the dominant developmental discourses of maturity so that the girls felt forced to grow up if they wanted to achieve at school. These dominant discourses were not the only ones available to them in the construction of their identities. Transformative and emergent discourses (Renold, 2005) are also traced to illustrate the multiple ways in which these female students experienced the school transition.

The researcher followed a focus group of five twelve-year-old female students through their last year of primary school and into their first year of secondary school. They attended middle class, single sex, private primary and secondary schools in the Sacramento County areas of North California. The students were predominantly Caucasians (95 percent) and Europeans (5 percent). In both schools, general student population showed signs of high achievement in mathematics, science, and literacy instruction based on their scores on tests and other measures of academic productivity. In either primary or secondary school that these female students attended, there were about 130 students.

The researcher visited the schools as a visitor 18 times, for two hours each visit. The observation was made in two settings – 8 times in primary school and 10 times in secondary school where this focus group of thirteen-year-old girls attended. For each visit, observation was usually

conducted from the students' arrival until lunch time. The data were collected based on participant observations, diaries, and interviews. The core concepts of their ideas about transitions and identities were analyzed and identified.

The remainder of this paper is divided into three sections. The first section specifically focuses on the academic transitions these female students made and the ways in which their feelings of academic achievement changed as they moved school. The second section looks in more detail at the nature of these transitions. The paper concludes by bringing both of the sections together in order to discuss the multiple transitions they experienced in the move to secondary school.

The Pressures of Growing up and Achieving in School

The thirteen-year-old female students in this study felt that the move to secondary school meant a move away from the fun and childish activities of the primary school. Indeed, they said that secondary school was a place in which their childhood identities would inevitably diminish. When the researcher asked why they thought so, shortly after their arrival in secondary school, they stated that it was because of an increasing workload and a new set of responsibilities. They mentioned that the teachers' expectations of them had changed on arriving at secondary school. One girl, Ann, said that she had learnt promptly in her first week of secondary school that she had to behave differently. She recalled an incident where she tried to help her former teacher by cleaning the classroom, moving chairs into position, and removing litter from the floor. Ann assumed the role of "class cleaner" in primary school; thus, she earned her favour with the class teacher. Nevertheless, Ann was shocked that she did not receive the same praise in secondary school and said, "she did not even give me a merit ... It just shows that it doesn't work here ... In primary school, they just wanted us to be good little girls but that isn't good enough in secondary school."

Other girls said that the teachers also had higher expectations for their work in seventh grade. They mentioned that it was no longer acceptable just to complete neat and colourful work: "In sixth grade, we really tried hard to get the marks." For the girls identified (by themselves and others) as the highest achievers in secondary school, the pressure to "grow up" and leave their childhood identities behind them was even stronger. They often talked in interviews about the need to "mature academically" in the secondary school. They felt it was no longer an option to mess around in class; they had to concentrate and behave if they wanted to succeed.

The Importance of Maturity in School Transition

In explaining their transition to secondary school, these thirteen-year-old female students appeared to draw on a number of traditional, historical discourses of what it meant to grow up and become adults. In particular, they drew on traditional discourses of maturity to explain their developing identities, which means they explained the process of growing up and changing schools as a normal and natural progression to maturity. Driscoll (2002) suggests that historically the conception of growing up and becoming an adult had very little to do with physical

differences, but instead was characterized by a supposed move from immaturity to maturity, from ignorance to knowledge, and from dependency to independence. It appears that the aims of the school (its strict academic ethos and emphasis on maturity) helped produce and reproduce these discourses as normative: “if you want to succeed, then you have to be mature.” Measor and Woods (1984) suggest this is not a coincidence as the organisation of schools by different age groups was developed according to these principles of child development. Not all girls fitted with the dominant ideal of maturity in secondary school. Jane was a good example of this. Jane was criticized by peers and teachers alike since primary school for being childish and always “having to act the class clown.” In primary school, her class teacher constantly warned her that she would not fit into secondary school if she “did not grow up.” Nevertheless, Jane told me that she was proud of her reputation for being childish and immature because it simply meant she was having more fun than the other girls in her class. In secondary school, she felt that this positioning had brought her even more popularity as she provided comic relief for the girls in the classroom. In one interview, Jane even criticised her friends for their maturity, calling them boring and old before their time “like sixty-year-old grandmas without the grey hair.” Her talk illustrates the fact that there were tensions for these girls within the dominant discourse of growing up and becoming mature. Indeed, they had to balance their behaviour so that they were grown-ups, becoming mature, but not too old and not too boring.

Being, Becoming, or Doing Childhood

Jane’s example also illustrates the fact that the progression to adulthood was not a simple progression to maturity: that childhood identities do not just disappear but become progressively conditioned by new definitions of adulthood. It appears that her case calls into question these taken-for-granted discourses of growing up and shows that there is more fluidity in construction of child/adult identities. As Prout (2005) suggests, the notion of beings may no longer be useful in theorising about children and childhood as it “risks endorsing the myth of an autonomous independent person, as if it is possible to be human without a complex web of interdependencies” (p. 45). Tyler and Russell (2002) also remark the notion of being privileges childhood as “the key marker of difference over and above other social identities and trends to lose sight of the extent to which childhood ... is an intersubjective experience that involves constant and complex renegotiation of a range of social and cultural identities” (p. 622).

The notion of being no longer appears able to reflect the multitude of experiences open to children as they grow up. It has been suggested, therefore, that in a late modern society where even adult futures are uncertain, both adults and children need to be seen through a multiplicity of becomings in which all are incomplete and dependent (Prout, 2005; Lee, 2001). Prout (2005) believes that one way becoming can be envisioned is through social generational theory which in his view seeks to explain aging as a complex social process in which both children and adults forge their identities through a range of discursive possibilities and in a range of different relationships. This theory opens up the idea that there are a number of ways in which people grow up. Although there may be certain dominant discourses that prescribe age-related behaviour, there are other

possibilities and multiple ways in which people experience this process. Jane is an example of one girl who was able to resist the dominant developmental discourses in her school in favour of an alternative childish identity. It is interesting to note, however, that even Jane would ultimately submit to the norms of natural development when necessary. At times, she had to act mature and achieve in the classroom.

The Pressures of Growing up and Becoming Feminine in the Secondary School

For the female students in my study, maturity was not the only characteristic expected of them as they changed schools. In interviews, the girls talked openly about the possible identities available to them as girls in the secondary school and many of them felt that there was an increasing pressure of femininity or that they were limited to an overarching dominant 'girlish' stereotype. This is illustrated in the following extracts:

T: Have things changed for you since being in secondary school?

E: Yeah! Like in primary school there were more kinds of people, but in secondary school, there are just girly girls.

K: As you become older, I think you become more girly.

A: Yeah like everyone in the eighth grade has like middle heels and does their hair and...

K: I don't know why people become more girly maybe they just have to...but definitely the older girls in this school act more girly.

As the latter extract shows, the girls were not often sure where the pressure for a feminine identity came from. Some girls explained, "it is just that the hormones kick in." Instead of linking the experience of transition and growing up to notions of maturity, here the girls seemed to be drawing on common conceptions of adolescence as inevitably linked to biology and marked by physiological changes (puberty). Other girls felt that it was simply an unexplained mystery of life: "You just know that somehow all girls will be like it in seventh grade." Many more girls felt that this was a dominant stereotype enforced upon them because of the school that they attended, "well they [the teachers] just expect you to be proper girls ... to sit right and do the things that girls do." They felt that the secondary school intensified the dominant discourses of femininity and because of this they were expected to behave in a stereotypically feminine manner. These thirteen-year-old female students believed that they had more discourses open to them as girls in primary school. As they moved to secondary school, they felt that they were more pressured to conform to traditional notions of femininity.

Feminine Identities in the Secondary School

The pressure to conform to stereotypes (Reay, 2001) was explained in a number of ways but mainly as a pressure to embody a feminine look:

T: *What do you think is important to girls your age?*

A: *For most girls, it is definitely hair and make up.*

E: *There is pressure to look a certain way...some people are like patrolling and are like the leader of the group and everybody sucks up to them and everyone wears what they wear.*

H: *Like follow the leader and like clones...they should do a star wars film called attack of the girly clones!*

It appears from their conversation that the body had become central to discourses of femininity in the secondary school as girls strove to achieve a highly feminine look. Frost (2001) suggests that the body becomes more visible as girls grow up and become women; “as she moves away from childhood, then, her body intrudes more and limits her more ... she polices her body more, exercises more discipline over it...[she must] inhibit her movements to become acceptably feminine” (p. 72). As girls’ bodies develop and change so do the meanings attached to them, so that a whole range of meanings of the adult body come to overlay those focused on the bodies of children. This, in turn, may lead to a change in identity for young girls, for if the body and identity are inevitably linked a change in one may prompt a change in the other.

Pleasure and Pain - Embodying Femininity

There were a few female students in seventh grade that were specifically identified as embodying feminine identity. These girls were immensely proud of their identities and appeared to gain enormous pleasure from them. When asked to explain the way she dressed,

Sue said:

All of the girls have to look their best if they want to impress. People such as tomboys never dress up as people like me. Short skirt, high heels, lipstick, make-up. That is what I wear. Look your best girls! I am glamour, glory, that's my thing!

Sue’s statement undeniably illustrates her enormous investment in a girly identity; she drew heavily on a “girly princess” image that was glamorous, pink and fluffy. It appears that Sue was not alone in finding this image appealing, as many of the women in Holland’s study (2004) invested in it in order to construct their gendered identities. Holland thinks that particular feminine traits are privileged and woven into the pleasures of a fairy tale. She uses a quote from Brownmiller (1984) to illustrate her point:

Who can imagine a fairy princess with hair that is anything but long and blonde, with eyes that are anything but blue, in clothes that are anything but a filmy drape of gossamer and gauze? The fairy princess remains one of the most powerful symbols of femininity the western world has ever devised” (p. 44).

It is interesting that Sue chose the word glamour to express her identity. Holland (2004) proposes that the word glamour relates to magical imagery; a magic spell or the “supposed influence of a

charm on the eyes; making them see things as fairer than they are ... fascination, enchantment, witchery” (p. 164). She also believes that glamour can mean a kind of groomed beauty or studied charm which is something that Driscoll (2002) agrees with. Driscoll identifies glamour as an expanding discourse which has its roots in Hollywood films of the 1930s and 1940s.

Driscoll suggests it is specifically a discourse based on effort and self production; the idea that a girl can be transformed into a star through effort. Sue’s use of the word “glamour” can therefore be taken to indicate the magical pleasure she derives from such an identity and the effort she has to make to maintain it. Sue also used the word glory to explain her feminine identity, a word connoting power - intriguing in the light of newer girl power (or even post-feminist) discourses.

However gender prescriptive the fairy princess identity appears to be, Sue did make it work for her. She was not alone in finding it pleasurable. Ann utilised her photographs to represent a “girly self.” On one of her photographs, Ann let her long flowing blonde hair down and donned a long pink jeweled skirt with a white flowery camisole top and matching sequin slippers. Like Sue, other girls would also use the interviews to talk about their “girly” hobbies. Many girls talked at length about the pleasure they received from investing in “girly” activities such as shopping, trying on clothes and visiting the new “Miss Manicure” beauty salon that exclusively dealt with young girls and teenagers. As this extract from field notes illustrates:

Ann, Jean, and Gale are all sat around the table discussing the clothes that they have bought for their teddy bears to wear from the shop that make outfits for them in the high street. Ann discusses the ballerina outfit that her mom bought her teddy on the weekend, talking about its intricate detail and sequined wand. Mid conversation, Jean leans over to Gale and grabs her hand and begins to squeal. She asks Gale where she got her “beautiful manicure” from and Gale replies that her father took her to Miss Manicure on the weekend for a birthday treat. I ask the girls if they go there often to which Ann replies that she is allowed to go sometimes but mainly for people’s parties and on special occasions. The girls talk about the treatments that they like to have in the salon finishing their conversation by agreeing that sometimes it really is great being a girl!

Like Sue, these girls found that femininity could be immensely pleasurable. One girl said, “A visit to Miss Manicure is like a dream come true!” It certainly was for these girls as they had the financial resources to make their dreams a reality and to literally purchase their dream identities.

Resisting Traditional Feminine Identities

Although these thirteen-year-old female students sometimes found pleasure in a particularly feminine identity, they would often “other” the identity in interviews (Renold, 2005). Unlike Sue, the majority of girls chose to identify themselves as “normal” girls, still feminine but not ultra-feminine. Some girls even preferred to actively disassociate themselves from all things feminine and claimed an alternative tomboy identity. Holland (2004) aptly describes the resistance to

traditional feminine identities in terms of abjections. She explains that abjection refers to the negative feelings women have about being female. However, she also suggests that often women do not experience feelings of abjection alone; they can be experienced alongside pleasure. So the feelings these girls have about being feminine are a paradox. Their mixed feelings of euphoria and abjection do not completely contradict one another, but instead create a paradoxical situation where the feelings are both true and false simultaneously. This certainly appears to be the case for a number of the girls in this study who wanted to be identified as feminine but at the same time actively resisted being identified as feminine. Many authors have suggested that the production of identities in school has always involved a mind/body split and that marginalized identities often represent bodily desire while dominant identities tend to represent mind and reason (Carlson, 1998).

As Gonick (2004) suggests, girls are now subject to old and new discourses; they have to live the contradictions of traditional discourses within the emergence of newer discourses of individuality. They gained a great deal of pleasure from their identities and sometimes it afforded them power and popularity.

Conclusion

It is necessary to recognise that these discussions are inevitably limited to the school context in which they took place. The single sex environment of the school appeared to intensify the dominant discourses of femininity and limit the ways in which girls could construct acceptable feminine identities. The strict academic ethos of the school also fostered a sense of maturity that the girls felt forced them to grow up. It would be erroneous to conclude that their identity constructions occurred only within discourses made available to them in the school.

There are a multitude of sites where girls can and do construct their various identities, such as the home, after school clubs, and even the medium of popular culture. It is necessary and has been productive to concentrate on identity construction at school and through school transitions. It is also essential that the multiple transitions and numerous other sites where identities are managed and negotiated be explored (Weis & Fine, 2000). The researcher would echo Jackson and Warin (2000) when they say that more longitudinal research is needed to explore school transition and the interface of identity construction and schooling. The researcher would also follow Thomson, Bell, Holland, Henderson, McGrellis, and Sharpe (2002) when they suggest it is time to look at the different transitions that students make in and out of schools. It is necessary to see how different strands of transition interact. It is essential that researchers follow female students across the critical moments that help forge their identity constructions. By concentrating on the multiple transitions female students make in the school environment, this paper has contributed to this work.

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